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Wealth, Power, And Rebellion: Class Conflict And Hidden Revolt In The Lord Of The Rings And A Song Of Ice And Fire

Author: Swikar Rai, Dr Surbhi Saraswat.

Education: M.A. English from Amity University, Noida, India.

Abstract

J.R.R. Tolkien's The Lord of the Rings and George R.R. Martin's A Song of Ice and Fire are renowned for their grand conflicts and richly imagined worlds, yet both also explore the often-unseen tensions between the powerful and the disenfranchised. This study investigates how these fantasy epics depict class struggle, economic inequality, and acts of resistance, dismantling the illusion of a stable, just feudal society. Though Tolkien's Middle-earth presents a more romanticized vision compared to Martin's gritty Westeros, both narratives expose the fractures in their social orders—whether through the quiet resilience of ordinary folk or the outright revolts of the downtrodden.

Using a comparative approach, this paper analyzes the mechanisms of power and dissent in these fictional realms. In The Lord of the Rings, the Shire's egalitarian simplicity clashes with Saruman's industrialized tyranny, while Aragorn's ascension to the throne subtly reaffirms traditional hierarchies. Conversely, A Song of Ice and Fire unflinchingly portrays the brutality of feudal oppression, with movements like the Brotherhood Without Banners and the Faith Militant embodying the rage of the exploited. Despite their differing ideological leanings, both authors embed sharp critiques of concentrated power and wealth, though Tolkien's conservative resolution contrasts with Martin's ongoing cycle of rebellion.

Drawing on Marxist and materialist perspectives, this research contends that fantasy literature does more than offer escape—it reflects and interrogates real-world systems of domination. The struggles between lords and laborers, or between rulers and the ruled, echo historical and contemporary conflicts over resources and autonomy. By examining these themes, the paper reveals how even mythic storytelling engages with the enduring question of who benefits from societal structures—and who pays the price.

Introduction

In the realm of fantasy literature, worlds are built on vast kingdoms, epic quests, and ancient prophecies. Yet behind the grandeur of dragons and elves, of White Walkers and dark lords, lie deeply rooted systems of economic inequality and social hierarchy. This dissertation seeks to investigate these hidden structures in two of the most influential fantasy sagas of modern literature: J.R.R. Tolkien's **The Lord of the Rings** and George R.R. Martin's **A Song of Ice and Fire**.

Though often studied for their mythopoeic richness or moral allegory, both Tolkien and Martin present societies rife with class division, privilege, and unrest. While Tolkien's Middle-earth may appear more stable and morally ordered, it nonetheless enshrines a rigid feudal order where nobility governs and servants remain voiceless. Martin, more overt in his critique, constructs Westeros as a brutal, corrupt, and blood-soaked arena where noble houses exploit the "smallfolk" and rebellion brews at every corner.

What is notable is not just the existence of inequality, but the subtle ways in which rebellion manifests. From Samwise Gamgee's quiet moral authority as a working-class gardener to the Brotherhood Without Banners' Robin Hood-like resistance, both narratives contain hidden revolts. These are not always grand revolutions, but daily resistances, symbolic inversions, and the survival of dignity in the face of domination.

This study applies interdisciplinary frameworks to explore these tensions. Through a Marxist lens, it critiques the distribution of wealth and labor. Foucault's theories of discipline and surveillance help examine how characters internalize systems of control. James C. Scott's "hidden transcript" theory offers insights into how subaltern voices operate within oppressive systems, not always through open rebellion but through coded subversion.

The comparison between Middle-earth and Westeros is especially revealing. Where Tolkien idealizes agrarian peace and heroic lineage, Martin tears down such illusions, exposing the blood price of power. Yet both authors, in their own ways, invite readers to question who wields power—and at what cost.

In a world grappling with rising inequality, class violence, and political unrest, these stories resonate deeply. This dissertation argues that fantasy, far from being escapist, is often the most potent lens through which to explore real social anxieties. It is in the margins of these stories—in the forgotten fields of the Shire or the war-torn villages of Westeros—that the true heart of rebellion lies.

Literature Review

The intersection of fantasy literature and socio-political critique has gained significant scholarly attention in recent decades, particularly as critics have moved beyond traditional mythological or moral readings. This chapter reviews existing academic discourse surrounding class dynamics, power structures, and subversive elements in fantasy literature, focusing specifically on **The Lord of the Rings** and **A Song of Ice and Fire**. It also draws from wider theoretical frameworks, including Marxist criticism, Foucauldian theory, and resistance studies, to contextualize both texts within larger debates about literature and ideology.

1. Marxist Theory and Class in Literature

Marxist literary theory has long examined the influence of class, labor, and material conditions in the production and content of literature. As Terry Eagleton writes in **Marxism and Literary Criticism** (1976), literature is not created in a vacuum; it reflects the ideological structures of its time. Applying this lens to fantasy allows readers to interrogate the representation of social classes not as fictional embellishments but as echoes of real-world struggles.

Fredric Jameson's concept of the "political unconscious" is particularly useful in this context. According to Jameson, literary texts inevitably encode political tensions, even when they are not overtly political. Tolkien's depiction of a feudal hierarchy in Middle-earth, with its valorization of kingship and nobility, can thus be read not only as nostalgic but as reinforcing dominant class ideologies. Martin, by contrast, appears to deliberately expose and subvert these structures, foregrounding exploitation, war profiteering, and the commodification of human life in Westeros.

Scholars such as Farah Mendlesohn (2008) and China Miéville (2012) have critiqued the fantasy genre for its often-conservative tendencies, with its glorification of monarchs and lack of systemic change. Yet others, like Rosemary Jackson in **Fantasy: The Literature of Subversion** (1981), argue that fantasy's estrangement from reality allows for potent subversive potential. In Martin's work, this potential is realized through the inclusion of class-conscious rebel groups like the Brotherhood Without Banners, as well as through narrative attention to the perspectives of the poor, the enslaved, and the forgotten.

2. Power and Surveillance: Foucauldian Approaches

Michel Foucault's ideas about power, discipline, and the internalization of control provide a useful framework for analyzing how characters in both series navigate and reproduce social hierarchies. Foucault's theory, particularly as developed in **Discipline and Punish** (1975), emphasizes how power is not merely repressive but productive—it shapes identity and behavior by embedding itself in everyday life.

In Middle-earth, the idealization of servitude is evident in the character of Samwise Gamgee, whose loyalty to Frodo borders on self-erasure. His internalization of duty, while emotionally noble, also reflects a deeper structure of deference ingrained through class. The Shire, too, functions as a panoptic space in which social conformity is enforced not through laws but through communal norms and expectations.

In Martin's Westeros, the surveillance is more literal and brutal. The ruling classes utilize spies, informants, and displays of violence to maintain control. Characters like Varys and Littlefinger exemplify the manipulative undercurrent of power, while noble houses like the Lannisters use both economic and military might to dominate others. Yet even within this oppressive system, individuals like Arya Stark and Brienne of Tarth resist normative roles, carving out alternate paths that challenge the gendered and classed expectations of their world.

3. Hidden Transcripts and Everyday Resistance

James C. Scott's seminal work **Domination and the Arts of Resistance** (1990) introduces the concept of the "hidden transcript"—the private, offstage discourse of resistance that contrasts with the "public transcript" of submission. This theory is especially useful in understanding characters who resist hegemonic systems not through open rebellion, but through quiet subversion.

In **The Lord of the Rings**, resistance manifests in the overlooked actions of the Hobbits. Their refusal to be absorbed into the larger political conflicts, their return to restore the Shire from Saruman's petty tyranny, and their rejection of worldly power (as seen in Frodo's refusal to rule) all suggest a deeper critique of hierarchical ambition. The Shire's utopian simplicity becomes a counterpoint to the destructive allure of power.

Similarly, Martin's narrative includes several examples of everyday resistance. The common folk's satire, rumors, and shifting loyalties form a kind of cultural insurgency. Brienne's refusal to conform to patriarchal ideals of knighthood, or Gendry's struggle to define his identity beyond illegitimacy, also represent forms of resistance that exist outside formal rebellion. Even Sansa Stark's political evolution—marked by survival, observation, and eventual influence—is a testament to the power of subversive intelligence in oppressive environments.

4. Fantasy as Ideological Reproduction or Critique

Debates continue over whether fantasy reinforces existing ideologies or critiques them. Tolkien's work has been both praised for its mythic power and critiqued for its romanticization of aristocracy. Scholars like Tom Shippey defend Tolkien as deeply anti-modernist, reflecting a distrust of industrialization and centralized power rather than promoting feudal hierarchy per se.

George R.R. Martin, often seen as Tolkien's postmodern foil, complicates the picture by dismantling the "heroic" tropes of fantasy. As Caroline Spector (2013) notes, Martin strips fantasy of moral absolutism, leaving behind a grey-toned realism where even well-meaning characters are complicit in systems of oppression. Yet both authors ultimately imagine worlds where resistance is possible—not always successful, but profoundly meaningful.

Recent scholarship, such as that by Helen Young in **Race and Popular Fantasy Literature** (2016), also critiques the racialized underpinnings of class in fantasy. While this dissertation focuses primarily on economic class, it recognizes that race, gender, and caste often intersect in both texts, especially in Martin's portrayal of Essos, slavery, and colonial structures.

Conclusion to the Literature Review

The academic conversation around fantasy and class is increasingly dynamic, challenging the assumption that secondary worlds are apolitical or escapist. By engaging with Marxist, Foucauldian, and resistance theories, scholars have begun to unravel the complex ways in which fantasy reflects, critiques, and reimagines structures of power. This dissertation builds on that work by offering a comparative reading of **The Lord of the Rings** and **A Song of Ice and Fire**—not simply to contrast two different authorial visions, but to understand how both narratives map the tensions between authority and rebellion, wealth and deprivation, and silence and resistance.

Chapter 1: Class Systems in Middle-earth and Westeros

The fantasy genre has long been a playground for imagining alternative social orders, but it also often replicates and critiques the very structures it seeks to transcend. Both **The Lord of the Rings** and **A Song of Ice and Fire** present intricate worlds with deeply entrenched hierarchies. Though differing in tone and purpose, both sagas draw from historical and mythic models of feudal society, complete with nobility, servitude, and peasantry. This chapter explores how these worlds delineate class, codify labor and inheritance, and sustain systems of power that privilege a few and burden the many.

1.1 Feudal Ideals and the Myth of Nobility in Middle-earth

Tolkien's Middle-earth is rooted in a medieval worldview, where hierarchy is often naturalized through moral and racial essentialism. Kings are not only politically sovereign but morally superior, and their legitimacy often derives from divine or inherited right. Aragorn's ascent to the throne, for instance, is not questioned within the narrative—it is framed as a restoration of proper order.

The valorization of bloodlines is visible in the reverence for Númenórean descent. Aragorn, Faramir, and other "high men" are depicted as nobler not only in lineage but also in character, wisdom, and military prowess. Meanwhile, Orcs, who arguably represent a dehumanized lower class, are portrayed as irredeemable and servile by nature. Such portrayals raise ethical questions about essentialism and the naturalization of class inferiority.

At the same time, characters like Samwise Gamgee complicate this rigid framework. As a gardener and servant, Sam is positioned at the bottom of the social hierarchy, yet he emerges as a moral anchor. His labor is invisible yet indispensable; his loyalty becomes the quiet engine of the quest's success. Though Sam never challenges the class system, his dignity and courage subvert stereotypes about working-class passivity.

The Shire itself, often idealized as a peaceful egalitarian space, is internally stratified. Wealthy landowners like the Sackville-Bagginses exert social dominance, while hobbits like Sam's Gaffer and Rosie Cotton belong to a working poor that sustains the community. The "Scouring of the Shire" chapter—often omitted in adaptations—exposes how class conflict simmers even in idyllic communities, and how exploitation emerges once power is centralized.

1.2 The Brutal Hierarchy of Westeros

Where Middle-earth cloaks hierarchy in honor and nobility, Westeros strips away such illusions. Martin's world is explicitly feudal, but without moral justification. The noble houses—Lannisters, Baratheons, Starks, and Targaryens—rule through force, wealth, and strategic marriage. Titles are often obtained not through merit, but through inheritance, conquest, or manipulation.

Westeros is a world where class determines survival. The "smallfolk," repeatedly referenced yet rarely given voice, live under the constant threat of war, taxation, and starvation. When lords clash, it is the peasants who burn. Martin uses this asymmetry to critique the glamorization of nobility. The War of the Five Kings, for example, reveals how elite power struggles devastate common lives, while the nobles continue to pursue glory and vengeance.

Characters like Davos Seaworth and Brienne of Tarth challenge aristocratic norms. Davos, a former smuggler, rises through merit under Stannis Baratheon's patronage, becoming one of the series' most ethical characters. His outsider status allows him to see the hypocrisy of noble politics. Brienne, though noble by birth, is socially marginalized due to her gender and physical appearance. Her knighthood is hard-won and symbolic of class mobility—but also an indictment of how exclusionary traditional structures remain.

Even bastardy is heavily classed. Jon Snow and Gendry are denied full status despite their noble blood. Their social exclusion shapes their identities and allegiances, fueling narratives of personal rebellion and self-determination. Yet this marginality also makes them valuable allies in times of upheaval—they embody the breakdown of rigid hierarchies in moments of crisis.

1.3 Slavery, Servitude, and Labor

Labor is central to both worlds, though acknowledged differently. In Middle-earth, labor is idealized when performed by Hobbits or Elves, but demonized when associated with Orcs or industrial forces like Saruman's machinery. The Elves' craftsmanship is seen as sublime; the Orcs' work, as unnatural and destructive. This moral binary reflects a deeper discomfort with mechanization and alienated labor, aligning Tolkien's views with romantic anti-industrialism.

Martin confronts labor more directly. His world includes slavery (in Essos), bonded servitude (like Theon Greyjoy's role in House Stark), and exploitative labor systems (such as the Night's Watch). The city of Meereen becomes a site for one of the series' few explicit class revolutions, where Daenerys Targaryen attempts to abolish slavery. However, her reforms are met with resistance not only from the elite but also from the former slaves, many of whom are unprepared for abrupt freedom. This reflects the complex dynamics of class transformation, where ideology alone cannot dissolve centuries of exploitation.

The Night's Watch, ostensibly a noble brotherhood, also functions as a carceral institution. Criminals, outcasts, and orphans are absorbed into a militarized labor force under constant threat. Their vows offer spiritual redemption but also serve as tools of social control. Jon Snow's leadership arc illustrates how internal reform is possible, yet constantly obstructed by entrenched power.

1.4 Inherited Power and Structural Violence

Both sagas underscore the enduring power of inheritance. In **The Lord of the Rings**, the sword Andúril, the Ring of Barahir, and the line of Isildur all symbolize rightful kingship—power flows from ancestral relics as much as from individual virtue. The idea that true leadership is "in the blood" legitimizes hereditary rule and discourages political change.

In Martin's series, inheritance is more volatile and contested. The Iron Throne itself becomes a site of endless succession wars, driven by blood claims and dynastic ambition. This volatility, however, does not democratize power—it merely shifts it between elite houses. Even when characters like Daenerys envision liberation, they often replicate hierarchical structures once in power.

Moreover, Martin is keenly aware of structural violence. The Faith of the Seven, for instance, becomes a radical populist force in later books, weaponizing religion against aristocratic excess. The Sparrows represent a proto-revolutionary movement, exploiting class resentment to disrupt elite hegemony. Though problematic in their extremism, they signify how marginalized voices can erupt into institutional disruption.

Chapter 2: Wealth, Inheritance, and the Illusion of Power

Wealth in fantasy narratives is often portrayed as a tool of noble stewardship or divine favor, reinforcing myths of legitimacy and moral superiority. Yet beneath this façade lies a pattern of entrenched inequality, where land, labor, and legacy serve to protect the powerful and marginalize the rest. This chapter explores how inherited wealth and symbolic power operate in **The Lord of the Rings** and **A Song of Ice and Fire**—not only as economic realities, but as ideological constructs that maintain elite dominance and obscure systemic exploitation.

2.1 The Hoarding of Wealth in Middle-earth

Tolkien's Middle-earth contains a complex relationship to wealth—one that reflects both a critique of greed and a nostalgia for pre-capitalist forms of value. The most overt example is found in **The Hobbit**, a precursor to the trilogy, where the Dwarves' obsession with hoarded gold leads to the desolation of Erebor and the rise of Smaug. Thorin's descent into "dragon-sickness" becomes a metaphor for the corrupting influence of wealth when it is detached from communal purpose.

In **The Lord of the Rings**, the remnants of this critique linger, particularly in the portrayal of Gondor's fading nobility. Minas Tirith, once a seat of glory, is marked by its ceremonial grandeur and economic stagnation. Steward Denethor presides over a kingdom in decay, clinging to relics of the past rather than addressing material realities. His stewardship is less about governance and more about preserving the illusion of control—symbolic power over substantive progress.

By contrast, the Shire operates as a localized, agrarian economy seemingly removed from such corruptions. However, even in this rural utopia, property defines power. The Bagginses, particularly Bilbo and Frodo, are wealthy landowners. Their ability to travel, gift possessions, and retire peacefully is underwritten by economic privilege. Sam, though loved and respected, remains a laborer who inherits only the garden and modest land. The gap between them, while framed affectionately, reflects class distinctions masked by friendship.

Notably, the Ring itself is the ultimate illusion of power—a seductive artifact that offers dominion but always corrupts. Its destruction by a humble Hobbit, and not a king or wizard, underlines Tolkien's moral vision: true power lies in renunciation, not possession. Yet even this act doesn't dismantle the class order—it simply reinforces moral virtue within the existing hierarchy.

2.2 Gold, Debt, and the Illusion of Legacy in Westeros

George R.R. Martin's Westeros is far more cynical in its treatment of wealth. Here, gold does not symbolize ancient wisdom or divine favor; it is the currency of war, bribery, and betrayal. The Iron Bank of Braavos, introduced as an economic superpower, epitomizes the impersonal, bureaucratic forces that sustain dynastic conflict. The Bank

lends money not on moral grounds but to whichever faction it deems most likely to win—a capitalist logic that turns war into investment.

The Lannisters, Westeros's richest house, embody the corrosive nature of inherited wealth. Their motto, "A Lannister always pays his debts," becomes both a threat and a mask for economic coercion. Tywin Lannister builds his family's influence through strategic marriages, funding wars, and ruthless control of resources. His legacy is defined not by honor but by accumulation—of gold, of power, and of debt leverage over kings.

Inheritance in Westeros is less a matter of destiny than of manipulation. Claims to the throne are constantly questioned, especially when bastardy, adoption, or questionable parentage arises. Yet the illusion of rightful inheritance is what justifies violence: wars are fought to "restore" or "protect" a birthright, even when such claims are fraudulent or fragile. This illusion shields the violence of elite politics under the language of tradition.

Characters like Petyr Baelish and Varys illustrate how economic and social mobility require deception. Both rise from low origins, yet neither challenges the system—they manipulate it to secure personal advantage. Baelish, in particular, understands the economic basis of power: he constructs a network of brothels, spies, and trade routes that grant him real influence, despite lacking noble blood. His famous quote—"Chaos isn't a pit. Chaos is a ladder."—is a direct indictment of the myth that power is about birth or virtue. In his world, power is transactional.

2.3 Wealth as Weapon and Barrier

In both Middle-earth and Westeros, wealth is used not just to sustain life but to control others. It defines the limits of action, especially for women, peasants, and non-heirs. In Gondor, Éowyn desires glory on the battlefield but is confined by gendered expectations of nobility. Her moment of rebellion—killing the Witch-King in disguise—is also a rebellion against the wealth-protected role of "lady" she is expected to perform.

In Westeros, economic dependence defines power relations. Sansa Stark's political imprisonment in King's Landing and later in the Vale is sustained by her status as a noble heiress, making her a pawn in the marriage economy. Her journey is one of awakening—not only to the violence of patriarchy but to the economic and symbolic tools used to keep women compliant.

Slavery in Essos further extends this idea. The Unsullied, for instance, are dehumanized into commodities, valued only for their martial discipline. Daenerys Targaryen's abolition of slavery is framed as heroic, yet her occupation of Meereen reveals the limitations of top-down revolution. The former masters resist reform; the former slaves struggle with identity and livelihood. The illusion of liberation cannot replace the reality of economic restructuring.

The Night's Watch is another site where wealth—or lack thereof—dictates fate. While noblemen like Jon Snow receive respect, the majority of the Watch is composed of criminals, debtors, and societal outcasts. Their labor, cloaked in vows of brotherhood, maintains the Wall and guards the realm—yet they are expendable. Power is distributed unevenly even within supposed egalitarian systems.

2.4 The Disruption of Inherited Power

Occasionally, both narratives allow disruptions in the flow of inherited wealth and authority, though these are often temporary or symbolic. In Middle-earth, the Fellowship includes diverse members—not all of noble lineage—who contribute equally to the defeat of Sauron. Yet after the war, power returns to the hands of kings: Aragorn ascends the throne, and the Hobbits retreat to their respective roles. There is no structural redistribution, only restoration.

Martin's saga, still unfinished, teases the possibility of more radical change. Daenerys dreams of "breaking the wheel," while characters like Tyrion Lannister and Davos Seaworth challenge the logic of birthright. However, even these reformers are constrained by the systems they inhabit. Real change is often co-opted, slowed, or reversed.

Economic inequality, in both worlds, is not merely a backdrop—it is the engine that drives many of the plots. The illusion of inherited right conceals the mechanisms of control. Whether cloaked in prophecy (**The Return of the King**) or in legalistic succession (**The Dance of the Dragons**), the outcome is the same: consolidation of power at the top, rationalized by the myth of legitimacy.

Chapter 3: Peasant, Servant, and Rebel Perspectives

The grand narratives of **The Lord of the Rings** and **A Song of Ice and Fire** are often driven by nobles, monarchs, and chosen heroes. Yet within the shadows of these dominant voices are the peasants, servants, and rebels—those

whose stories are rarely told, yet whose presence is essential to the moral, emotional, and political fabric of these worlds. This chapter explores how both Tolkien and Martin present the subaltern classes: not merely as background figures but as carriers of quiet resistance, resilience, and, at times, radical critique.

3.1 The Voiceless Majority: Middle-earth's Common Folk

Tolkien's narrative privileges noble and Elvish perspectives, but glimpses of the common folk reveal a world that runs on their labor. The Hobbits of the Shire, for instance, represent a pastoral working class—gardeners, brewers, and small-scale farmers—whose simple lives stand in contrast to the high drama of Gondor or Mordor. Though often romanticized, the Hobbits' lifestyle underscores the importance of self-sufficiency, cooperation, and resistance to industrial imperialism (as embodied by Saruman's defilement of the Shire).

The most striking moment of peasant revolt comes in "The Scouring of the Shire," a chapter often excised from adaptations. Here, Frodo and his companions return to find their homeland under petty authoritarian rule, enforced by local collaborators and imposed hierarchy. The Hobbits' rebellion—armed with little more than pitchforks and courage—echoes real-world class uprisings. Their reclaiming of the Shire becomes a symbolic assertion of communal values over imposed power.

Outside the Shire, however, common folk are barely developed. We rarely hear from Gondorian farmers, Rohirrim villagers, or the enslaved populations of Mordor. Orcs, arguably the foot soldiers of the oppressed, are rendered as monstrous and voiceless. Their possible sentience is overwritten by their function as cannon fodder for evil—a troubling erasure that reflects the genre's occasional complicity in dehumanizing the "enemy other."

3.2 Smallfolk and Soldiers: Westeros from the Bottom Up

George R.R. Martin, by contrast, consistently foregrounds the cost of nobility's games on the lives of ordinary people. The "smallfolk" in Westeros are not merely background—they are casualties, rioters, and survivors. During the War of the Five Kings, towns are burned, harvests stolen, and women raped. Refugees wander the countryside, and entire villages disappear. Through Arya Stark's journey across the Riverlands, the reader witnesses the brutal toll of war on the peasantry.

Importantly, Martin gives names, voices, and dignity to these characters. Hot Pie, a humble baker's apprentice, finds peace not through revenge but through reclaiming his craft. Gendry, an illegitimate blacksmith, becomes a symbol of both physical labor and lost nobility. These characters are not heroes in the traditional sense—but their survival, integrity, and solidarity with one another mark them as moral centers in a world rotting from the top.

The Brotherhood Without Banners is perhaps the clearest embodiment of class-conscious rebellion in Westeros. Initially formed to protect the smallfolk abandoned by the lords, the Brotherhood becomes a guerrilla force, challenging the feudal order. While their shift under Lady Stoneheart veers toward vengeance, their early mission speaks to the real grievances of the lower classes. They represent a kind of people's justice—flawed, bloody, but rooted in the reality that no one else is fighting for the poor.

3.3 Servants and Silent Rebels

Servants in both series navigate a paradox: they are close to power, yet remain disempowered. In **The Lord of the Rings**, Samwise Gamgee is the quintessential servant—humble, loyal, and often overlooked. Yet it is Sam, not Frodo, who carries the Ring when the latter collapses. It is Sam who defeats Shelob, who ensures the quest succeeds, and who later becomes Mayor of the Shire. Though he never renounces his class position, Sam's quiet heroism suggests a subtle rewriting of who gets to be "important" in the epic frame.

By contrast, Martin presents a wider and more critical range of servants. Podrick Payne, a lowborn squire, earns reader affection through bravery and loyalty, but remains structurally limited. Missandei, once a slave and now a trusted advisor to Daenerys, speaks over a dozen languages yet remains defined by her past and her function. Her eventual death—beheaded while in chains—becomes a painful metaphor for how those from the lowest strata are ultimately disposable, even within revolutionary movements.

Perhaps the most nuanced example is Sandor Clegane, the Hound. Though not a servant by title, he serves power all his life—first the Lannisters, then the king. His arc from brutal enforcer to reluctant protector of the weak reflects a slow rebellion against the system that used and scarred him. His refusal to serve in the end—choosing instead a violent death on his own terms—stands as both a rejection and an indictment of the world's moral order.

3.4 Humor, Subversion, and Storytelling as Resistance

In both worlds, resistance does not always appear as open rebellion—it also emerges in laughter, folklore, and oral storytelling. In Tolkien's world, songs are crucial: they preserve memory, honor the dead, and connect communities. The Hobbits' songs, in particular, reflect a kind of cultural resilience. They sing not to dominate, but to remember. Their joy becomes a form of defiance.

Martin uses humor and rumor as political tools. Tyrion's wit is often his only weapon in a world that despises him, and the smallfolk's gossip—naming Joffrey "the boy king" or mocking noble scandals—reveals how the lower classes reassert psychological agency in a society that offers them little else. These "hidden transcripts," to borrow James C. Scott's term, become mechanisms of survival.

Chapter 4: Symbolic Rebellion – Subtle Acts of Resistance

Not all resistance takes the form of swords and uprisings. In deeply hierarchical societies like those in **The Lord of the Rings** and **A Song of Ice and Fire**, rebellion often arises in coded ways: through silence, sarcasm, self-sacrifice, or symbolic refusal. These acts may seem minor within the vast political landscapes of Middle-earth and Westeros, yet they chip away at hegemonic narratives, giving voice to the marginalized and destabilizing the assumed legitimacy of power.

This chapter explores such forms of resistance—those that occur in conversations, in choices of loyalty, in rejections of destiny, or in the refusal to become what the system demands.

4.1 Sam's Refusal: Rewriting the Epic Hero

Samwise Gamgee's journey is arguably the most subversive in Tolkien's narrative. Though cast as a sidekick, Sam often performs the duties of the central hero. His love for Frodo, expressed not in grand speeches but in steady acts of care, becomes a form of rebellion against the epic tradition that values bloodlines, prophecy, and martial valor.

Sam's most defiant act is not against Sauron, but against the structure that would keep him "in his place." His final return to the Shire, followed by his election as Mayor, marks a quiet but profound class transition—from servant to respected leader. He does not need to seize power; he earns it through moral authority. His story rewrites what it means to be heroic—not by overthrowing lords, but by loving fiercely, enduring quietly, and restoring home.

4.2 Arya Stark: Identity as Resistance

Arya's journey in **A Song of Ice and Fire** is marked by a refusal to conform. As a highborn girl in Westeros, she is expected to marry well, speak softly, and remain loyal to her house. Instead, she learns swordplay, disguises herself as a boy, joins a cult of assassins, and adopts multiple identities—not as a betrayal of self, but as a strategy for survival and vengeance.

Her use of masks is more than magical—it is political. Arya becomes "no one" not to disappear, but to reclaim control over her life. In killing powerful men, including Walder Frey, she enacts a form of justice denied to the lower classes. Her resistance is not to the idea of power itself, but to the institutions that monopolize violence and erase the pain of victims.

Arya's very body—female, young, and non-conforming—is a site of rebellion. By refusing to become what Westeros demands of her, she creates a path outside the system.

4.3 The Refusal to Rule

One of the most powerful symbols of resistance in both narratives is the act of rejecting power. Frodo's refusal to claim the Ring, and later his departure from Middle-earth, signals a break from the cycle of domination. Even after

saving the world, Frodo does not become a ruler, a general, or a prophet. He leaves because the cost of violence, even righteous violence, is too great.

Similarly, Jon Snow's execution of Daenerys in the **Game of Thrones** adaptation (and likely a version of this in the books) stems from his realization that power, even when held by idealists, can corrupt absolutely. His rejection of the throne and exile to the North mirrors Frodo's quiet withdrawal. Both men choose peace over glory, suggesting that real rebellion may lie in renouncing systems of control altogether.

4.4 Tyrion Lannister: Wit as Defiance

Tyrion's entire existence is an act of resistance. Born into the most powerful house in Westeros, he is hated by his father, mocked by society, and feared by the elite. His weapon is not steel, but intellect. He uses language—humor, irony, storytelling—as a defense against cruelty and a critique of power.

When Tyrion demands a trial by combat, when he confesses not to crimes but to being "a dwarf," or when he kills Tywin on the privy, he is undermining the entire Lannister legacy. His refusal to be silent, despite the cost, becomes a form of rebellion. In a world where birth usually defines worth, Tyrion carves out space for himself through narrative control. He refuses to play the role of monster, even as others force it upon him.

4.5 Female Voices and Silent Power

Women in both worlds often exercise power from the margins. In **The Lord of the Rings**, Éowyn's decision to ride into battle disguised as a man is both a literal and symbolic resistance to gendered confinement. Her slaying of the Witch-King—"no living man may hinder me"—is not just a prophecy fulfilled, but a rejection of male monopoly on heroism.

In Westeros, Sansa Stark evolves from pawn to player. Her resistance is slower, more internal. By surviving, observing, and mastering court politics, she becomes a force of subtle subversion. Her final demand in the show—to make the North independent—may be controversial, but it is a political move grounded in hard-earned clarity. She resists through endurance, through learning how to wield power instead of being consumed by it.

4.6 Brotherhood, Memory, and the Subaltern Archive

The Brotherhood Without Banners preserves a kind of oral resistance. They exist outside formal structures, drawing their strength from the people. Though corrupted later under Lady Stoneheart, their initial ethos is one of radical justice. They become an archive of memory—remembering the injustices inflicted on the poor when no one else does.

Likewise, the songs and poems of Middle-earth, passed down by Elves, Hobbits, and Men, function as collective memory. They keep alive the stories of ordinary people who resisted despair. Tom Bombadil, an enigmatic figure who resists the Ring altogether, may be read as an allegorical refusal of power's logic—untouched, untempted, and entirely outside the hierarchy.

Conclusion

Rebellion, Resistance, and the Fantasy of Change

Across the vast landscapes of Middle-earth and Westeros, wars are waged, kings fall, and empires rise again—but beneath these sweeping narratives lie deeper tensions of class, power, and human dignity. This dissertation has traced how **The Lord of the Rings** and **A Song of Ice and Fire** portray deeply hierarchical worlds, yet continually circle back to the voices, struggles, and quiet defiance of those excluded from traditional authority.

Tolkien constructs a mythic universe that idealizes kingship, yet he also invests moral weight in the humble and the unassuming. The Hobbits—especially Samwise Gamgee—subvert heroic norms by succeeding not through violence or legacy, but through loyalty, humility, and love. The Shire, while not without class divisions, becomes a

space where communal resistance flourishes in the face of authoritarian takeover. Even so, Tolkien's world largely restores old orders rather than dismantling them. His vision of justice is restorative, not revolutionary.

Martin, by contrast, exposes the brutality of elite politics and interrogates the myth of legitimacy. His characters are more cynical, more morally ambiguous, and more entangled in systems of exploitation. Yet Martin also gives fuller voice to the oppressed. The Brotherhood Without Banners, Arya Stark, Davos Seaworth, and Sansa Stark—all represent different strands of rebellion. They do not merely seek to replace rulers but to survive, to subvert, and to reshape the structures around them, often in deeply personal ways. Westeros is not redeemed, but it is cracked open.

Both authors engage with the illusion of inheritance—that wealth and leadership are justly passed through bloodlines or divine favor. Tolkien tempers this illusion with humility; Martin shatters it with violence and irony. In both worlds, characters who reject power often emerge as the most ethical: Frodo, Sam, Jon Snow, Brienne, Arya. Their refusal to dominate becomes a form of radical action.

Fantasy, then, is not a genre of escapism, but a terrain of ideological struggle. Its dragons and rings, its castles and quests, are metaphors for the real-world systems we inhabit. These stories hold mirrors to capitalism, monarchy, patriarchy, and colonialism—not always with perfect clarity, but with undeniable force. They ask us to imagine not only different worlds, but different ways of being within them.

Ultimately, rebellion in these narratives is not always revolution. Sometimes it is survival. Sometimes it is storytelling. Sometimes it is a servant carrying his friend up a mountain, or a girl choosing her own name, or a baker refusing to fight. These moments, small and flickering, are where change begins.

In these silences, refusals, and buried hopes, fantasy becomes not a retreat from history—but a rehearsal for it.

Key Words

Fantasy literature, class conflict, rebellion, symbolic resistance, hierarchy, Tolkien, Martin, power structures, political fantasy, Marxist theory, servant perspectives, social inequality, identity, nobility, inheritance, hidden transcript, subaltern voices, myth and power, narrative subversion, feudalism, epic fantasy

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(Note: This is a modeled list. You'll want to finalize formatting based on your preferred citation style—MLA, APA, Chicago, etc.)

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